

PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ISOLATION IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S THE TIGER'S DAUGHTER, JASMINE & THE DESIRABLE DAUGHTER

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ABSTRACT

Bharati Mukherjee is a Third World female writer whose main concern is to look deep into the troubles of South Asian Women. The present research paper explores the physical and psychological experiences of homelessness by portraying Indian women's migration to the United States. My objective of analyzing both novels is to bring to the surface female protagonist's physical and psychological solitude and isolation. These female migrants experience isolation from their surroundings as well as from the migrant society. Bharati Mukherjee exhibits various forms of isolation, on the one hand, immigrants suffer intense trauma of detachment and on the other hand, they have to become a part of a survival system that permits them to retain their personal and social identities for securing their self-image. The aim of discussing these novels is not to narrate the stories of female migrants but to penetrate deeply into their personal and private sphere. Migrants keep on oscillating between the longings of home and of adopted world and go through constant psychic battle. The significance of the metaphor of a home in the psyche of an immigrant has been discussed. The journey of their separation from their own homelands and shifting to new lands is brimmed with a variety of traumatic experiences. Her fictions pose the question of nostalgia for a lost home, rupturing of the self, fragmentation of the individuality, assimilation and cultural translation.

KEYWORDS: Expatriate, Exiles, Adaptability, Migrants, Homelessness, Belonging, Hostland

INTRODUCTION

Home is a complex and difficult domain in the diasporic world. Home is an unfixed and unstable place for all diasporic groups migrants and exiles which exhibits multiple native connections and their condition of homelessness. In a traditional sense home has taken a central place in our psychological life. It is often interpreted by its relation to the outside world. Nikos Papastergiadis states in his introduction to *Dialogues in the Diaspora* (1998)

"Irrespective of its location home is the sacred place from which everything is mapped. Dreams of journeys begin from home and the rest of the world extends outwardly from this radix. Mapping elsewhere is also a homing device. Our inward returns are read as confirmations of an incontrovertible dynamism. The meaning of home has both a centrifugal and centripetal force; it combines both our inner and outer trajectories. Home is the centre of the world"¹ (Papastergiadis 2).

Home is a divine place from which everything is recognized. It is such an intimate and private place which provides care and nourishment to all dwellers by the process of identification. The notion of home is redesigned through a

positive sense of association. Home acts as an intimate and private domain within public domain, a place of association, intimation, belonging, and security, is the nucleus of our all private and public gains and losses. Susan Thompson proclaims that home takes up a physical and symbolic meaning. He further proceeds, "Home is the familiar, taken-for-granted world where most of us are nurtured, comforted and loved. Home is where we can dream and hope, relax and be ourselves, laugh and cry"² (Home and Loss). Home incorporates cultural, symbolic and psychological importance, so it takes its meaning beyond just a description of intimate and physical zone and structure. The notion of home stretches out its meaning beyond the four walls and elongates to neighbourhood, city, region and nation. Home provides security and lessens the risks and dangers of the environment, and gives a sense of protection and belonging. According to Thompson:

"Home is a symbol of personal identity and worth, where the individual can exercise a degree of power and autonomy denied elsewhere. Significant life events, both sad and happy, learning experiences, and celebrations of varying type and magnitude, all occur at home. These are the bases for our memories of home and its importance to us, serving to imbue the notion with a sense of permanence and continuity over time"³ (Home and Loss).

The sense of home is synonymous to the place of dwelling for majority of people, yet this statement is opposed by various phrases like there is no place which can be termed as home, rather home is always where heart and mind resides. The later phrase is an ambiguous one and Amitava Kumar proposes in his introduction to *Away The Indian Writer as an Expatriate* (2001), "It suggests that there can be no other place like home, a sentiment often espoused by those who are seen as having gone away; alternatively, it can also mean that the idea of home is a delusion, it never existed in the purely safe form"⁴ (Away XVIII). Home is not a site for living but is knitted with emotional and psychological yarn. It has symbolic and imaginative meanings. A house will remain a house only with such investments. It will be turned into a home by investing emotional and psychological meanings. Even then home can not only be described in a purely positive sense. It is a location of alienation and domestic violence. Home also refuses to take inside those who are not considered as normal individuals like lesbians, Gays and others who are not included in normal category, and they resist of being abandoned and are taken away from the sense of association. A lesbian named Gloria Anzaldua fears from the idea of home and such idea of home frightens such individuals. She states in her essay "Borderlands: La Frontera" "Fear of going home. And of not being taken in. We're afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, la Raza, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged"⁵ (Anzaldua 42). Therefore, home is pregnant with both positive and negative meanings.

The multifaceted quality of home highlights Freud's distinguished idea of the *unheimlich*. In an essay "The Uncanny" Freud brings to mind the idea of character and knowledge of the uncanny and its relation to literature and life. Freud states that several times, literature creates a queer and unclear fear in us. Even in our life we experience the same fear. For Freud this inexpressible and inexplicable experience of fear is the Uncanny. In the essay 'The Uncanny' Freud tries to untie the knotty source and nature of this queer fear. The *Heimlich* is a German term which means 'of the house', something familiar, personal, private and friendly makes Freud aware that "heimlich is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its, *unheimlich*"⁶ (Freud 934).

Freud further proclaims that with a variety of meanings the word *Heimlich* unveils one meaning which is similar to its antonym *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* thus takes up the meaning of *Heimlich*. *Heimlich* takes its first meaning which is known and pleasant and second meaning which is concealed and kept covered. According to Freud the first home of an individual is the womb which is repressed and unseen and induces acutely equivocal feelings:

"It often happens that neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female Genital organs. Thus unheimlich place, however, is the entrance to the former Heim of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning."⁷ (Freud 944)

Freud stresses that the primary home is pre-natal. In order to achieve subject-hood and individuation, the subject needs detachment from his/her mother. The individual is in dual relationships with unheimlich and Heimlich, the concealed union with the mother and in order to achieve the status of a subject the individual has to give up the affiliation and bond. Thus confusion and dilemma also depicts the relationship of a modern man, especially of a migrant, expatriate or exile his/her accommodations. Papastergiadis proclaims that the notion of home is totally unsafe in modern time. Modernization witnesses scattering, fragmentation and loss of traditions and customs and an intensified isolated and individualistic status. The traditional concept of home exhibits the concept of stability, represents unvarying and perpetual customs, acts as a collection of sweet memories and fancies and is the final centre of our desire. Contrary to this, the recent condition of a drifter, migrant or a displaced person is totally deterritorialized and determined for mobilization, of new translocal connections and liberty for unending rediscovery. The subject is deprived of old home because it is "bound to unchangeable customs; restricted to pure members; ruled by strict authoritarian father figures; stifled by superstitious beliefs. In short the old home represents closed traditions. To stay there is to atrophy. In contrast, modernity promises a sense of the present which I open, encourages mobility over stability."⁸ (Papastergiadis 7). Papastergiadis puts forward the problem that modernity is obsessed with the memories of lost homes and burden of living in permanent condition of homelessness.

The concept of home and nostalgia are presented in a totally different way in Bharati Mukherjee's works. The change in the meaning of home in the works of Mukherjee relates to the change in her own experience from an expatriate to an immigrant and this shifting of experience signifies her displacement from Canada to America. She penned two works *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972) and *Wife* (1975), during her stay in Canada. During this phase of expatriation she experienced racial attacks on the basis of the difference in colour of her skin from white Canadians. In her immigration phase when she got settled herself in Canada, she wrote four works, *Jasmine* (1989 rpt, 2002), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave It to Me* (1997) and *Desirable Daughters* (2003). In the United States, her fiction was glorified and she won great admiration as an outstanding writer. She acknowledges her shift from Canada to America as a "movement away from the aloofness of expatriation, to the exuberance of immigration"⁹ (Darkness 2-3). Bharati Mukherjee's nomadic shifts are the basic stuff for her texts. All her female protagonists in her novels *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife* can't gain victory over their sense of detachment and remain aliens even after adopting host culture while her three heroines in *Jasmine*, *The Holder of the World* and *Desirable Daughters* surpass their sense of loss and become conquerors. As expatriates all these characters shed their past status and identity by giving more emphasis on the cultural aspects of host land. The centre of their emotional possessions and interests is not their native land but new courses with probability of full liberty and boundless discoveries. Due to this hyphenated status and nostalgia they want to break off the boundaries and search for assimilation into their host culture, which is the basic maxim for their survival.

She penned her first novel *The Tiger's Daughter*, which is the story of a girl, Tara Banarjee who belongs to an upper class Bengali Brahmin family, goes to America for getting higher education at an age of fifteen. She experiences, "fainting spells, headaches and nightmares She complained of homesickness in letters to her mother"¹⁰ (TD 13). Tara feels homesick and she keeps thinking of her home, her family and her native village by sitting near window. She imagines if

she had not been from a Bengali Brahmin family and not, “trained by the good nuns at St. Blaise’s to remain composed and ladylike in all emergencies, she would have rushed home to India at the end of her first week”¹¹ (10). David Cartwright is her American husband and he remains an alien to her. She has not actual communication with him. When Tara after a gap of seven years, goes back to her native land, India she soothes herself with the thought of returning to her homeland and she realizes that her home is an alien land for her. At first sight, the dilapidated condition of Bombay attacks her and after reaching Calcutta, she is surprised by the, “squalor and confusion of Howrah station” (27). When she is in America, she acclaims New York, which had been extremely beautiful and “it had driven her to despair” (34). But now Calcutta is an alien land for her. Tara has been changed by America irreversibly. From religious aspect, she goes away from all the religious rituals performed at home and this is no little loss according to her mother, it is a “little death, a hardening of the heart, a cracking of axis and centre”(51). Even her intimate and dear friends now have become strangers for her. She “feared their tone, their omissions, and their aristocratic oneness” (43). She has got trapped into two situations; on one hand she was not on speaking terms with her husband and on the other, she could not share with anyone that in Nayapur, Tuntunwala raped her. Tara was home sick and nostalgic in America and this distant sense of unbelonging makes her visualize ideal picture of her native place Calcutta. But she soon comes to know this fact that Calcutta was not a native place for her, it was a place of despair, sadness and oppositions, “newspapers were full of epidemics, collisions, fatal quarrels and starvation. Even murders, beheadings ” (97). Therefore, in *The Tiger’s Daughter* migration is the root cause of homelessness and disattachments. Tara, even after her migration to America, mentally attached to the past and actually could not belong to any place completely.

Bharati Mukherjee’s first novel *Jasmine* highlights her immigrant phase in America. During this phase, Mukherjee proclaims and reveals her complete American identity. She throws away her hyphenated identity and totally denies her Indianness. Hence, *Jasmine* reflects the ebullience of expatriates and absorption into the American culture and proclaims Mukherjee’s total denial of immigrant condition. Consequently, *Jasmine*, the heroine of the novel, after her resettlement in America, casts off her feeling of home sickness for her native home in Punjab and makes adjustments in the host culture. Though *Jasmine* renounces her Indian identity, yet the feeling of regretfulness and longing for the native land still lingers in her mind. Her yearning for her parental home is changed into homing desire. Her new home in the host land is a remoulding site for regular transformation of her identity. The first name of *Jasmine* was Jyoti, when she was in India and not married to an engineer Prakash Vijh, who was a self-supporting modern man who loved his own self-sufficiency. Prakash was interested to resettle either in Germany or in U.S.A and not in Emirates because he wanted to settle permanently in USA, not as a guest worker. He searches for a real life in America and does not want to spend rest of his life, “here with backward, corrupt, mediocre fools” (*Jasmine* 81). Prakash wants to make *Jasmine* a new type of urban and modern woman by breaking off her past. He assigns Jyoti a new name *Jasmine* to change her past identity but before fulfilling his American dream, he is killed in the battle of Khalsa Lions for Khalistan. After the death of her husband, Prakash Vijh, *Jasmine*, a widow plans to move back to her native land to live with her widow mother, and she aspires, “There is no dying, there is only an ascending or a descending. Don’t crawl back to Hasnapur and feudalism. That Jyoti is dead” (96). She expresses her strong feelings about Prakash that he was the creator of *Jasmine*, “*Jasmine* would complete the mission of Prakash”(97). For fulfilling the dreams and her life’s project she makes her entry into America in an illegal way without having complete travel documents. She rides an aeroplane and the national airline to which it belongs doesn’t have any existence in any directory. She is interested in going to engineering college in Tampah where Prakash got his education. She goes there and stands under palm trees to commit sati by burning herself.

America has totally transformed her. She is raped by the Half-Face, who is the captain of the ship. Eventually, she kills him and decides of not to commit sati and aspires, "Lord Yama, who had wanted me, who had courted me, and whom I'd flirted with on the long trip over, had now deserted me"(120). As a survivor, she restarts her new expedition in America. She makes her own routes, new passages and new specifications. For starting her journey she transforms her identity from Jazzy to Lillian Gordon, Jase to Taylor and Jane to Bud Ripplemeyer. She abandons her old individuality and specification with all her past connections with ease and comfort. She throws away nostalgic drives from her life. She transforms and refashions herself according to the situation and place and finally comes out as a survivor. Those who can't take risks and are not prepared to face any danger, there's nothing for them in future. Those who hide themselves in nostalgic web are not ready for any transformation. Jasmine states, "To bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bulletproof vest, was to be a coward" (185). Darrel, who lives in Iowa, does not give up old techniques of farming, the Vadhera family lives in Flushing as well as Jasmine's father after India's partition had migrated and resettled in Punjab, they all hold tightly to their old traditions and customs which are outdated and have no future. Darrel's suicide represents his deep emotional connection to his land of birth and his devotion to his past cultural asset. Adaptability is the fundamental quality to remain alive. Jasmine's chameleonic and adjustable self is a good symbol of this quality of diasporic adaptability.

Jasmine does not look at her past nostalgically. She flings herself on the track of endless reinvention. She has no time for old memories of home town. She takes herself away from everything which makes her nostalgic. While recalling the memories when she used to live with Vadheras, she feels there like her own home town Punjab. She expresses the house of the Vadheras provides the safety but it acted like a prison for her. She thinks, "Flushing was a neighbourhood in Jullundhar. I was spiraling into depression behind the fortress of Punjabiness I would find myself sobbing from unnamed, unfulfilled wants. In Flushing I felt immured. An imaginary brick wall topped with barbed wire cut me off from the past and kept me from breaking into the future"(148). She states that she tolerated this punishment of prison for five months and then moved out. If she had spent one more night, she would have died of boredom.

Jyoti of Hasnapur has located her new home in America and got freedom. America for her is a place of movement, she moved out of the period of stasis. Jasmine can easily transform her identity from Jase to Taylor. She can easily become Jase for Taylor and Jane for Bud Ripplemeyer and gets pregnant with Bud's child. At the end of the novel she easily moves out of the Bud's life to become Taylor's Jase without a single trace of guilt in her mind. Jasmine expresses her feelings and states she is a, "tornado, rubble-maker, arising from nowhere and disappearing into a cloud" (241). She is full of aspirations and desires and is always in search of new perspectives and range of experience beyond border lines. She is on a journey of making new associations and thrills. Jennifer Drake illustrates the meaning of Jasmine's Americanization that Jasmine, "gives up a certain kind of home, home-as-comfort, home-as-talisman, exchanging that stable desh for imagination's portability, it's astonishing and insistent demolitions and reinventions, its works"¹² (Drake 65).

In the transformation of Jasmine America's fluidity plays a significant role. She takes possession of the words of Zygmunt Bauman as he states, "liquid modern identity"¹³ and Jasmine states that in the modern times, liquid modern way is the only way to belong to other. Bauman describes the meaning of liquid modern bonding that "Bonds are easily entered but even easier to abandon. Much is done (and more yet is wished to be done) to prevent them from developing any holding power; long-term commitments are decidedly out of fashion"¹⁴ (Bauman 20). Jasmine has located home in

America and this American home acts as consumer sociality and the bonds among members remain healthy as long as their level of ease and comfort remains good. This consumer sociality is defined by the factor of convenience in context of marriages and divorces. This house offers prompt satisfaction and liberty for which Jasmine yearns for. This home provides her a stable place of her unstable and variable identity. Jasmine acts as a rash and careless consumer of a shopping mall, having unquenchable appetites where she is offered ever-changing identities to wear like masks over counter.

Jasmine believes in reincarnation and this Hindu belief goes with the American myth of melting pot. This is what is known as translation which Jasmine tries to bring forth. This translation is from both sides first she is changed by America and secondly she is responsible for changing the way the Americans look at their intermingling histories and cultures. Joseph Brodsky puts forth his views in this context, "Civilization is the sum total of different cultures animated by a common spiritual numerator and its main vehicle speaking both literally and metaphorically is translation. The wandering of a Greek portico into the latitude of tundra is a translation"¹⁵ (Brodsky139). In Jasmine, a new myth of harmonious assimilation is created by uniting together American melting pot and reincarnation. This is a good example of translation. Bharati Mukherjee proposes that for survival in the present, it is harmful and damaging to pass through the deceptive network of nostalgic experience even the flexibility of Jasmine is continuously helped by her past.

Jasmine and *Desirable Daughters* have a thirteen years gap. Mukherjee, in *Desirable Daughters* again highlights her status as a assimilationist. But now she treats all concepts relating to home, nostalgia and belonging delicately. As an assimilationist, Mukherjee reconceptualizes these issues and it is evident in her interview, with Dave Weich in 2002:

"It's that moment in diaspora: white America is not the America of the mythological melting pot that my character Jasmine had bought in the late eighties – discard your past if you can, or suppress it, and reinvent yourself as often as you need to (and some of those reinventions are hopelessly excessive) until you find a new autobiography. Here it's no longer possible. Neither America nor the non-European immigrant accepts that melting pot myth. It's been discarded."¹⁶ (David Weich Interview)

The story of *The Desirable Daughters* revolves around three sisters – Tara, Parvati and Padma, born and brought up in Calcutta in the 1950s. Parvati is willing to resettle in Bombay and finally decides to live there after her American visit. She has fallen in love with Aurbindo Banerji in Boston when she is in the second year at Mount Holyoke. Tara and Padma stay in America because they take the large space of novel and both exhibit two different relationships with America. Their story brings around the reflection of Mukherjee's article "Two Ways to Belong to America" in which she brings forth two opposing and contrasting ways of discussing diasporic ideology. Out of them, one sister exhibits the way of assimilation and other exhibits her nostalgic experience and longing for roots, Mukherjee says, "This is a tale of two sisters from Calcutta, Mira and Bharti, who have lived in the United States for some thirty-five years, but who find themselves on different sides in the current debate over the status of immigrants. I am an American citizen and she is not. I am moved that thousands of long-term residents are finally taking the oath of citizenship. She is not"¹⁷ (Mukherjee 271). Tara wants to be like an American and Padma refuses to assimilate in American culture like her sister Mira but for both Tara and Padma past is real as well as alive in their minds. Therefore, migrants or expatriates alone are not only pass through nostalgic pangs but those who value immigration are also cursed to bear grief.

Tara gets married to her parents chosen boy Bishwapriya Chatterjee. In America, Tara and Bish start a new life and while living in Atherton, Tara tries hard to become an American wife for her husband. Bish gets great success in America and joins Silicon Valley and earns lots of dollars but soon the driving force of Tara which helps her to act like an

American wife is pushed her back as she feels sick of her self-satisfied, secure, well settled life with Bash. Tara feels all alone and this isolation turned into a being. She expresses her grief, "Loneliness had made me a little wanton; wantonness made me very lonely"¹⁸ (DD 262) to overcome this isolation, Tara decides to leave Atherton and move to upper Haight in San Francisco. She takes her son Rabi and her lover Andy, an ex-biker/hippie, Buddhist carpenter. Tara owns her condominium with the help of her lover Andy. Now she doesn't consider herself as an alien. She is fully satisfied by converting her apartment into her home and expresses her satisfaction that, "After all the work, I felt for the first time in my life at home, unwilling to leave" (25) Tara lives with her Hungarian –American lover Andy and leaves behind her first husband Bish. After moving out of Bish's life, she now asserts to have her own home but still the pain of separation from old native Indian home hurts her badly. The new place where she moves in Upper Haight, is susceptible to summer fogs and this delightful panorama reminds Tara, "not unhappily of summer resorts in India" and she gets lost in, "corn and peanuts smoking on open braziers, the tinkling of women's bangles and Buddhist prayer wheels"(24)

Kajol Ghosal describes that Tara was wandering aimlessly between two cultures and "drifting between two lives" (246). Tara considers her identity as an American and she thinks America has changed her completely. She is aware of her native Hindu identity which is visible in her temperament. Due to this, various Hindu gods and goddesses like Kali, Brahma, Manasha, Adya Ma and many more we come across repeatedly in Desirable Daughters. Tara gets a hyphenated identity and shares her nostalgic journeys with Andy and reminds him about the past, "The past is nice It is nice to visit the past every now and then. Just don't live there" (76) Andy too feels deep concern with his Hungarian past. He "avoids them, often he shudders at the memories, but at other times, as though prompted by an inner voice, he practically embraces them"(73) The ugly Indian past of Tara again reappears in the form of Christopher Dey who is the illegitimate son of Tara's sister Padma and her Christian lover Ronald Dey. She is convinced by her distant ancestor Tree-Bride for undertaking a root search. Tara comes back to her native place as a pilgrim. Tree-Bride expresses to her that she is insisted to go back for searching her roots and then she comes to India just as a pilgrim, by following the path of the Ganges.

Therefore, Tara cannot forget her past easily like other Indians as Bengalis, Punjabis and Sindhis cannot detach themselves from their ancestral associations of past. It is hard for them to keep themselves away from lugubrious chains of nostalgia. Padma and her husband come under this category. Dr.Mrinal Ghosal and his wife Kajol Ghosal exhibit the spirit of Indinness and they try to maintain it through managing their kitchen in an Indian style and by decorating their bedroom in a complete desi Indian manner: "bedroom was a full-scale desi reproduction" (243) Kajol Ghosal proclaims that Tara recalls her past memories terribly and her recollections are so strong that her "eyes start watering" (244). Tara's condition is different from Padma as Padma is a hyphenated immigrant. This hyphen entitles them as minorities residing at margins. Parvati acquires American education and marries to an American Indian man and leads a luxurious life in India. She is a symbol of typical Indian woman with a western orientation.

Thus we notice that Jasmine proceeds towards Americanization with every reincarnation and rebirth which she acquires in America. This exhibits Mukherjee's diasporic liminality. She has a thorough understanding of intricate human psyche which she has adequately tried to explore through her all characters in all her works. She has drawn a close parallelism between Jasmine and Tara. Tara like Jasmine considers herself an American citizen and claims herself not to be an expatriate. Similarly Tara like Jasmine is a fluid and unfixed character who enjoys the freedom of a consumer in a shopping mall but Jasmine differs from Tara in having homing desire and this desire encourages her for taking new and unfamiliar routes and due to this she explores her past which is a combination of myths and legends.

CONCLUSIONS

Mukherjee is primarily concerned with unhousedness resulting from displacement and migration and this opens up new possibilities of great liberty for a transcultural subject. She rejects herself as a nostalgic figure and also rejects non-contingent outlook for a home but for a future home she openly accepts the offerings for endless reinventions of self. Her successful assimilation into the American culture describes her 'textual politics'. The above analysis defines these accounts of home and belonging as oxymoronic. In the multi-layered Diaspora space the contestatory voices negotiate the concepts and idea of home and belonging. Home and belonging both remain as competitive territories. Bharati Mukherjee brings to the surface the aspirations, hopes, wishes and expectations of all her female protagonists who aspire to survive with their native culture in the host lands. Through her novels she manifests how her migrant female characters keep cling to their native cultures and homelands. Female migrant protagonists are separated from their homes, families, relatives, friends and social relations. Throughout their life they feel a sense of loss and experience that they are missing something very important, associated with their past and homelands. This sense of separation both physical as well as psychological gives a new meaning to their lives and defines them. As an immigrant writer Bharati Mukherjee struggled hard to define the status of the immigrants.

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